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The Home Life of a Buccaneer

BY WALTER K. FISHER

ILLUSTRATED WITH A DRAWING AND A PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

ON account of his thievish disposition and general lack of regard for the property of others, the man-o'-war bird (*Fregata aquila*) is looked upon as something of a scapegrace. But however unsavory his reputation may be or unconventional his ethics, he partially compensates by peculiar habits and bizarre appearance, which render him one of the most entertaining of all sea-fowl.

During a visit to Laysan, a small but remarkable island situated eight hundred miles northwest-by-west from Honolulu, the writer had an excellent opportunity to learn something of the home life of these birds. Laysan is a mere sandy atoll, slightly elevated, enclosing in its central dish-like hollow a placid lagoon, not connected with the sea. The white coral sand slopes up from a grassy, weed-strewn plain surrounding the central body of water, to a rim near the sea beach, and the highest point is scarcely thirty feet above the surf. Bushes of various kinds, *Chenopodium*, *Santalum*, *Scaevola*, and coarse tussocky grass cover most of the island, while handsome morning-glories, succulent purslane, and several other pink, yellow, and white flowers add a bit of color to the treeless, monotonous, stretches.

Laysan is a veritable bird paradise. Thousands of albatrosses rear their young here each year, free from fear of injury. Sooty, gray-back, and white terns, noies, noddies, blue-faced and red-footed boobies, tropic birds, several kinds of shearwaters, petrels, and man-o'-war birds are in legions, not to omit five indigenous 'land birds', including a rail and a duck. During the year numerous migrants, chiefly limicoline species, among which the bristle-thighed curlew and Pacific golden plover are prominent, visit these remote shores. How they find the islet is



COURTING ANTICS OF MAN-O'-WAR BIRDS

a mystery, for it is only three miles long by one and a half broad, and is so low as to be perceptible only a few miles at sea.

We found the man-o'-war birds living in little communities of half a dozen pairs or more, and they had built their nests of sticks and morning-glory vines, placing the rude structure on the top of low bushes. Here either the male or female was always to be found, holding down the claim as it were. Sticks are difficult to obtain because the birds must break them from the bushes, and this means work. No professional robber loves work, as such. Consequently if both birds left the home, even for a short time, certain roving neighbors would consider it their duty to appropriate any suitable material for the enlargement of their own houses. And then, when the real owners returned they would look in vain for the nest, which melted away as if by magic.

These birds are amusing creatures in more ways than one. They habitually sit on the nest with their heads tucked down between the wings. Consequently they always appear as if chilly, with their shoulders hunched up and their 'hands' deep in their pockets. Yet one finds it far from cold in the glare of tropical sunshine.

But the greatest 'circus' of all, if I may be allowed the term, is the male bird. Just under his chin he has a little pouch of bare skin, like a wattle, which is technically known as a gular sac. During the courting season, this pouch is inflated to a large size, and becomes a most brilliant red. In fact the adornment resembles a toy balloon, such as small children delight to dangle on a string. The color is astonishingly bright, being a crimson, which varies in its intensity from time to time, for the sac often catches on its surface the sheen of the sky, or becoming somewhat collapsed, turns translucent orange about the sides.

As we wandered over the inner slopes of the island we could see these grotesque creatures on all sides, sprinkled among brooding birds with shriveled sacs, and white-breasted females. It would be difficult to convey any idea of the droll expressions which the 'puffed up' males habitually assume. The photograph hardly does justice to the subject. If the sac is fully inflated it obscures the whole breast, so that when viewed from the front the bird appears to be peeping over itself. Only the crown of the head, the beak, and two very bright eyes can be seen. At a distance one is strongly reminded of great red fruits resting in their foliage of soft green.

Fregata will often sit for a long time as shown in the photograph, scarcely altering his position. But if his spouse appears somewhere overhead, sailing to and fro, he is all animation at once. As she swoops down he suddenly stands up in the nest, throws back his head, spreads his great wings, and protruding the brilliant pouch, shakes his head from side to side, with a hoarse cackle. Occasionally she deigns to alight near him. Then he takes even greater pains to make his charms conspicuous, for, trembling with excitement and waving his pouch, he fluffs up the long, greenish, iridescent feathers on his back. In this posture he attempts to strut, but cannot; so instead he cackles and chuckles in an outlandish manner, calculated to captivate his mate. But at this moment she usually flies away, leaving him to relapse into his former stolidity.

After the single white egg is laid all this ceases. The sac is no longer inflated, and resumes its usual insignificant size. Both birds settle down to the serious duty of brooding the egg, and guarding the nest from marauding neighbors. Their eternal vigilance is even more necessary when the naked chick is hatched, for if there is one piece of devilry in which the frigate bird indulges, it is

kidnapping tender nestlings. There are always a number of birds flying back and forth over the villages, as if on the lookout for prey. Ordinarily they could not make even a fair living in this manner, for all species know enough to cover the chick closely. Mr. J. O. Snyder frightened a female off her nest one day to observe the little one, but even while he was watching there was a rush of wings, and a bolt out of the sky caught up the defenseless creature, and was off in a flash.

Man-o'-war birds never alight on the water, and on land only when necessary. Their great powers of flight have been gained at the expense of their legs, which are the merest travesties. Walking is a feat which they are unable to accomplish, and if obliged to attempt it they sprawl over the nest, or ground, in a most awkward manner. When alarmed they consequently have difficulty in arising, espe-



MALE MAN-O'-WAR BIRD ON NEST

cially the males with swollen throats. But once awing they are perfectly at home, and sail off with consummate ease and grace, the crimson 'balloon' of the male swaying from side to side. Their appearance as they soar aloft with this impedimentum can be more readily imagined than described.

I believe nature has devised a no more perfect flying machine than one of these birds. There is a temptation with every one who has observed their splendid powers of flight to become enthusiastic. But in the art of soaring *Fregata* is deserving of any meed of praise we may bestow, for in swiftness, skill, and endurance it is without a rival. The albatross is a wonderful creature at sailing, though a fresh breeze is a necessity for its best efforts. On comparatively calm days the man-o'-war birds are able to rest on motionless wings, or slowly to describe circles

high in air, where of course some breeze is stirring. They frequently rise so high that one can scarcely detect them against the shimmering blue of the tropical sky. Suddenly one of these lofty birds takes a notion to descend, and promptly does so, by a series of long leaps, or swoops, that make one fairly dizzy.

The presence of a ship excites the curiosity of younger birds, and it is a pleasant sight when a whole flock hovers around the mastheads. Here they move leisurely back and forth, but give most of their attention to the lazily fluttering pennant, which they attempt to swallow. Hardly once in an hour do these birds flap their wings, but only spread and close their deeply forked tails, which evidently aid them in balancing. They are complete masters of their element.

Frigate birds glean a portion of their livelihood from the host of creatures which live at the surface of the ocean: flying-fishes, ctenophores, jelly-fishes, vel-vela, janthina, and in fact anything that may attract their fancy. I even observed one bird aimlessly carrying a splinter of wood, uncertain of its utility, yet unwilling to release it. As they never alight on the water, they seize such bits of food by swooping down in a broad curve. They are able to measure distance so accurately that no disturbance is created when the object is grasped.

On Laysan this good judgment was utilized when the birds drank from a small pond. They flew back and forth about twenty feet above the surface, then suddenly darted downward in a long curve, and just at the right instant, like a flash, bent the head down, dropped the lower mandible, and scooped up a little water. So swift was the performance that I was always a moment too late, when photographing it. The males with inflated pouches cut a most ridiculous figure, for the sac would plow a little wake, and also tend to overbalance the birds, but I saw no accidents.

We were somewhat surprised and disappointed that we were not a witness to those acts of highway robbery for which the man-o'-war bird may be said to be justly famous. Whether they occurred during our stay of a week (May 17-23, 1902) I am unable to say, but if so, must have been rather rare, because either Mr. Snyder or myself were usually in the field at all times of day. The explanation probably is that the warfare starts when the young frigates hatch or begin to require considerable food. As noted above not all the birds had yet deposited eggs, while the young were exceedingly few in number.

The best account by far that I have ever seen of this high-handed proceeding is given by Mr. William Alanson Bryan, in his monograph of Marcus Island,^a and in concluding I can do no better than quote his words (l. c. p. 114).

"I have before referred to the large colonies of common brown boobies about the north point of the island. It was in the vicinity of this colony that the man-o'-war birds were most abundant. Here they would lie in ambush for the old boobies and tropic birds as they returned from the sea heavily laden with fresh food for their young. Sitting quietly on the tree tops, or more often wheeling high overhead industriously patrolling the island, out where the surf broke on the reef, these birds would keep a sharp lookout to sea for a sight of the returning fishing fleet of boobies. Sighting one (sometimes consisting of one, sometimes of several individuals) as many as half a dozen hawks would make for them under full sail, and without a moment's warning would engage a helpless bird in battle. Swooping down upon it from every side, buffeting it with their wings, snapping at

^a A Monograph of Marcus Island, by William Alanson Bryan, in: Occasional Papers of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, II, No. 1 Director's Report for 1902. Honolulu 1903.

it with their long hooked bills, flying now above, now before, now below it, the hawks would so confuse their victims that eventually, feeling that the only safety for its life lay in letting go part of its store of supplies as a sop for its assailants to quarrel over, the booby would on a sudden drop one of its fish, whereat a hawk would swoop down, more rapidly than the eye could follow, and catch the food before it had touched the wave, then taking it securely in its bill would fly majestically off to feed its own ever expectant offspring. The unfortunate booby meanwhile was farther pursued by the less fortunate hawks until, reft of all her quarry, she was allowed to return to her young.

"On the fringing reef hereabout were exposed a number of large blocks of coral stone that served an interesting purpose in these sea battles. If a booby succeeded in warding off or evading her pursuers from the first attack she would set a course direct for one of these rocks, the hawks usually increasing in numbers at every moment in hot pursuit. Perhaps another fish would be dropped on the way, but if at last the bird was able to make this place of safety its pursuers would mount high in air, or, to use a sea term, lay off and on, sailing back and forth always keeping the sharpest watch on the brown object sitting quietly on the rock. After a short rest, and choosing a favorable opportunity when its pursuers were at some distance, the booby would make a final dash for the shore. The nearer it got to the beach the more furious grew the conflict; for in addition to the hawks both the noddy and white terns would take a hand in the robbery. It often occurred that a bird that had let go its catch one by one as it came in would here, within fifty yards of its nest, disgorge its last fish, which would be eagerly caught up by any one of its pursuers that was able to secure it. Panting and excited the old boobies would drop down on arriving at the colony in an exhausted condition.

"The frigate birds showed much discrimination, selecting at once the boobies that were most heavily laden and consequently more liable to pay generous toll when brought in contact with this high-handed system of exacting customs duties. Though tropic birds were attacked they were more rapid flyers and more expert in evading pursuit. As in the story of the two dogs that quarreled over a bone, it was not uncommon in the performances I have described to see the tiny white tern reap the most substantial benefit from one of these encounters. Battles similar to those mentioned were to be seen during the entire day, but towards nightfall they were more numerous as well as more severe."

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The Farallone Islands Revisited, 1887-1903

BY W. OTTO EMERSON

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

FROM the old Spanish Chronicles we learn of the discovery of the Farallone Islands in 1543 by Ferrelo. It was Sir Francis Drake, however, who gave us the first particular description of the "Island of St. James," as they were then known (1579). Drake, it seems, landed to replenish his larder with seal meat. Doubtless he laid in a stock of eggs, for a man is never too old a boy to collect eggs where they may be had for the taking. In 1775 Bodega and Maurelle,